New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Grass Harp"

The New York Times

March 28, 1952

Truman Capote's First Drama, 'The Grass Harp,' Is Acted at the Martin Beck

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Out of good impulses and sensitive perceptions Truman Capote has written a beautiful play. He calls it "The Grass Harp"; it was acted with delicacy and love at the Martin Beck last evening. Although Mr. Capote has written fiction, "The Grass Harp" is his first play—made, as a matter of fact, from one of his novels. But it is written as though he were in full command of the stage, for it has lightness and grace and fills the theatre with poetry.

There is a curious wisdom in it, too. It is the story of a fantastic Negro mammy, an aimless youth and a kind-hearted spinster who feels that she has been driven away from home by her termagant sister. Dazed by ugly words and wounding accusations, the odd trio leave home and take refuge in a tree-house in the woods.

* * *

In the first section of the play, Mr. Capote is writing with an original, off-beat humor that seems completely irresponsible. It has been gathered out of his vagrant memories and turned into comedy. But he has something more than a frolic in mind. For the greater part of "The Grass Harp" is an idyll about the pure in heart who, like the meek, inherit the earth.

All the common impulses of the world are against the trio who find sanctuary in the tree house. The avaricious sister is outraged. The whole town is shocked and angry, and an armed posse invades the woods to capture the traitors to society and march them back to civilization. One of the deputy sheriffs, doing his duty, shoots the youth and wounds him.

But "The Grass Harp," being pure in heart itself, shows how much stronger the people of spirit are than the people of cant, discipline and selfishness. Their triumph is modest and humble, but it is unmistakable in a final scene written with great tenderness.

* * *

Since Mr. Capote has acquired a reputation for eccentricity, no one should be surprised by the improvised form of his play. But the surprise is to find so much instinctive compassion and generosity in his attitude toward his characters, so much natural faith in their good impulses and so much old-fashioned wisdom in some of the speeches he has written. There is nothing artful or coy about his play—nothing even self-conscious. For this is a delicate, sweet affirmation by a young man of poetic sensibilities who has some odd bits of understanding rattling around in the recesses of his soul.

* * *

Without a good deal of sorcery in the production, the magic in the writing would never come to life in the theatre. Fortunately, Mr. Capote has been loyally abetted by people of taste and imagination. Cecil Beaton's set of the living-room is amusing and inventive, but his tree-house in the woods is a wide, hospitable, shining idealization. Using a light orchestra, Virgil Thomson has composed some entrancing occasional music.

And Robert Lewis, in his best form, has directed a superb, soft-textured performance. As the sister who is driven from home by a harshness she cannot bear, Mildred Natwick creates a memorable character who is both timid and brave, and capable of more love than she dares believe; and who is crowned with glory by the simple nobility of her spirit. As an aged judge with an independent mind and a dream of beauty in the world, Russell Collins gives a fine performance that is rooted in humanity but sprinkled with stardust, too.

* * *

Georgia Burke's bitter-tongued, temperamental, loyal, garrulous, overbearing mammy is vastly entertaining, woven into the dainty web of the play without breaking a thread. As the youth, Johnny Stewart gives a guileless performance of moodiness and affection. Ruth Nelson's avaricious sister and Jonathan Harris' unctuous crook are admirably acted. Lenka Peterson plays the part of a romantic schoolgirl with pleasant familiarity. As members of a kind of jeering, heartless chorus, Sterling Holloway, Alice Pearce, Susan Steel, Gertrude Flynn, Jane Smith and Val Dufour complete the design of a well-orchestrated performance.

In the technical jargon, "The Grass Harp" is probably a fantasy. But somehow that does not seem to recognize the fact that Mr. Capote and his associates are incantating a serious theme. Mr. Capote believes in the pure in heart and has said so with beauty, humor and understanding.

"THE GRASS HARP"

Comedy by Truman Capote, based on his novel; staged by Robert Lewis; musical score by Virgil Thomson; scenery and costumes by Cecil Beaton; presented by Saint Subber in association with Rita Allen at the Martin Beck Theatre, March 27, 1952. The cast:

Catherine Creek..Georgia Burke
Collin Talbo.....Johnny Stewart
Dolly Talbo....Mildred Natwick
Verena Talbo.....Ruth Nelson
Dr. Morris Ritz..Jonathan Harris
The Reverend's Wife.....
Susan Steell
The Reverend.....Ralph Hertz
The Barber...Sterling Holloway
The Baker's Wife.....
Gertrude Flynn
The Postmaster.....Jay Barney
The Sheriff.....Val Dufour
Judge Charlie Cool.....
Russell Collins
The Choir Mistress..Jane Smith
Big Eddie Stover.....
Anthony McGrath
Brophy.....Jules Racine
Sam.....Larry Robinson
Maude Riordan..Lenka Peterson
Miss Baby Love Dallas....
Alice Pearce

New York Post

March 28, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Truman Capote's Romantic Fantasy

There is a great deal of beauty and imagination in Truman Capote's dramatization of his own novel, "The Grass Harp," which opened at the Martin Beck last night, and, the theater being what it is, there is cause for jubilation at the arrival of a new playwright bringing to it such estimable qualities. If the second of its two acts were less of a let-down, I could be considerably more unreserved in my remarks, but, although Mr. Capote's surprisingly gentle fantasy does collapse rather dismally in its later sections, there is still enough that is brightly charming in it to make it of more than average interest.

I suppose it is inevitable that "The Grass Harp" should be compared to the celebrated and controversial stage works of William Saroyan, which have been so sadly missing from the American theater of late, and, as something of a Saroyan enthusiast, I must say that Mr. Capote does not make up for his lamentable absence. The taciturn Armenian brought to his fantasies an exuberance, a vitality, and a wild humor in characterization that the Southern newcomer doesn't provide, and "The Grass Harp" seems a little too quietly precious to be completely satisfying. But it certainly does have its points.

The Flight

It happens, however, that they are almost entirely to be found in the first act. The story, as you have probably heard, is of a gentle and slightly childish old lady, a rebellious boy and an outspoken Negro woman who, finding themselves badgered by the forces of order, take to a house in the trees, where, joined by a philosophical old ex-judge, they plan to defy the outside world. It is when they have fled to the trees, and sit around contemplating the state of things, that Mr. Capote's fantasy is at its happiest. There has assuredly been nothing more delightful this season than their forest musings.

This is where the author leaves them at the end of his first act, and the result is a state of well-being at intermission time which requires only a satisfying final act to bring about an evening of real contentment. Unhappily, instead of living up to its warmly engaging promise, the play proceeds to run down steadily, and neither the brevity of the second half or an unexpected shooting can quite save it. What is chiefly unfortunate is that the second-act weakness makes one tend to forget that the early sections have been delightful. But, at its best, "The Grass Harp" is too good to be ignored.

Yes and No

There is, I think, no doubt that Mr. Capote brings a quality of imaginative charm to the theater that is warm, fresh and engaging. Its very lack of brashness and conventional theatrical showmanship has a winning attractiveness all its own. And the scene after the judge has joined the refugees and the ruminations begin is a joy, particularly since Russell Collins plays the judicial gentleman with delightful understanding. But this seems to be a period in the drama when nothing goes altogether right, and, in the end, it requires great respect for theatrical imagination to cause one to forgive the eventual weakness.

The production is both attractive and well-acted. Cecil Beaton's sets and costumes are beautifully in the mood of the narrative, and Virgil Thomson's incidental music is of immense help. So, on the whole, is Robert Lewis' direction. The performances are likewise helpful. Mildred Natwick as the old lady, Johnny Stewart as the boy, Jonathan Harris as a swindler, Lenka Peterson as an ingenue, and, especially, Russell Collins are of great assistance. Admiring imagination in the drama, I found a lot to like in "The Grass Harp," but there is no escaping the suspicion that is should have been much better.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
March 28, 1952

'The Grass Harp'

By WALTER F. KERR

SEEING "The Grass Harp," which was given a rich and affectionate production at the Martin Beck last night, is like coming across a handful of flowers in an old scrapbook. The flowers have been pressed into attractive patterns, but they are quite dead.

Author Truman Capote has set out to express his nostalgia for the freedom of childhood, and his admiration for people who manage really to live their own lives. To make his point, he has invented a quiet, rustling, half-lit world into which both adults and children may steal—and in which they may find themselves once more.

The special vehicle of his fantasy is a charming old tree-house, set apart in the woods where only the music of swaying grasses is heard. When the prim and put-upon spinster, Dolly Talbo, discovers that the tyrannical sister to whom she has given a life of devotion has actually conspired to cheat her, she can bear the cruelties and the ingratitude of life no longer.

She flies to the tree house, taking with her a strong-willed Negro maid and the rebellious adolescent boy who has been reared by the two sisters. They are quickly joined by Judge Charlie Cool, who is something of an outcast himself, and who, in the peace and clarity of their new environment, finds himself proposing to Dolly.

But the scandalized townfolk will have none of this nonsense, the mean-spirited sister is herself defrauded and left penniless, and Dolly at last returns to their barren life together, filled with a new understanding.

I say "filled with a new understanding," though I am not at all certain just what that understanding is. Capote has marked in the outlines of his thought, and he has provided his actors with dissertations upon the subject from time to time. But he has not filled in his fantasy with those moments of poetic feeling which succeed in convincing us that difficult decisions are inevitable, that absurd attachments are delightfully logical.

Though Cecil Beaton has created a tree-house which is visually enchanting, author Capote never enchants us with the prospect of living there. And though the stern sister, Verena, is meant to be a pitiful figure toward the close of the play, she never overcomes our initial resentment. We are left in a kind of emotional no-man's-land, puzzled as to why Dolly should want to move in either direction, and the play is without the tug and pull of a genuinely affecting play.

The author has been brilliantly served in his production. Cecil Beaton's decor, not only in the spectacle of arching branches against star-shaped leaves but in the gingerbread confinement of the sisters' home as well, is simply wonderful. Virgil Thomson has provided a shimmering musical score which so successfully catches the play's poetic intention that it is sometimes a disappointment to return to Mr. Capote's literate but curiously unlyrical prose. And Robert Lewis has, in his staging, found theatrical excitement for a number of tenuous moments: eight people singing lustily in the arms of the tree, a barrage of flashlights poking through its branches, a boy tenderly summoning a girl to a rendezvous.

Certainly no one could ask for a more fetching performance than the one Mildred Natwick is giving as Dolly. The delicacy with which she pulls a veil over her face at the sound of a gunshot, the look of reproach she gives her maid when the maid answers a lover's call for her, the simple belief with which she recounts an early and most unlikely encounter with gypsies go to make up a performance that is deliciously childlike and winning.

Georgia Burke, as the loyal maid who speaks her mind, dashes off the play's best comic lines with vigor and style. Alice Pearce, as a cosmetic salesman, plays what is practically a short revue sketch with fierce, and very funny, intensity. And Russell Collins states the play's theme, and gives an account of his own flight from reality, with gentle authority. I thought Ruth Nelson's domineering sister, though, too severely stylized, and Johnny Stewart has some difficulty in keeping the boy's precocity from seeming merely smug.

Here and there Truman Capote has written some telling lines, evoked some pleasant memories. When he tells us that Dolly is the kind of person who, given a star to wish on, wishes only for another star, he characterizes in a swift, deft stroke. But his virtues come in bits and pieces. "The Grass Harp" never really wins you over to its own special world.

Journal American
March 28, 1952

Here Grows Biggest Tree Since Brooklyn

By JOHN McCLAIN

There is no question that Truman Capote can write an arresting novel, a poetic speech and a funny line. He can also delineate a character. But in his first effort at drama, "The Grass Harp," presented at the Martin Beck Theatre last night, he succeded only in combining all these talents to achieve complete bewilderment.

I am either too young or too old to be anything but bored by the machinations of Southern neurotics, or even Northern neurotics, and I found the evening doubly dreary when I discovered the theme involved a general disparagement of what was once considered the normal relationship between men and women.

It might be worth viewing, even so, if the narrative went anywhere. For my money it went up into the highest branch of the most handsome tree grown on any stage this season and sat there all evening.

This tree, designed by Cecil Beaton, is an integral part of the plot and serves as a highly decorative background for much of the proceedings. This shouldn't happen to such a tree.

It seems that two spinster sisters live in an old Southern mansion with the son of another sister who has been left with them. There is also the ever-lovin' colored companion.

* * *

Townsfolk Revolt

Comes a breach between the sisters, and the less-privileged one and the boy and the faithful servant take off and establish domicile in a tree.

There they are joined by a very nice guy, a retired jurist, who succeeds in bringing some semblance of sanity to the proceedings. He even quite normally finds himself in love with the tree-borne sister.

But then the angry townsfolk revolt, led by the sister who has been left behind, and everybody winds up on the ground once more. The boy's romance with an apparently acceptable young girl is unfulfilled, the judge is chased out of the house and the sisters exit, arm in arm. I don't get it.

* * *

Can't Live in a Tree

The author Mr. Capote, has been quoted elsewhere as saying that it means merely that you can't escape from the realities of life—you can't go away and live in a tree. Okay. I'll buy that, but it seems a terribly tortuous way of telling same.

In black ink, however, must be recorded the fact that there are many uproarious lines and a good measure of truly lyrical monologues. Mildred Natwick is extremely appealing as the put-upon sister and Johnny Stewart is engaging as the boy in the case.

Georgia Burke, who played the colored companion, succeeded at times in bringing the entire auspices near enough to earth to make them believable.

I have no quarrel, nor great approbation, for the direction of Robert Lewis and I thought that Virgil Thomson's incidental music added pleasantly to the confused mood.

Cecil Beaton, mentioned before, grew the greatest tree since Brooklyn, and another exciting set for the nostalgic Southern interior. His costumes were also highly imaginative, and timeless, and it is to be regretted that so much was devoted to so little.